

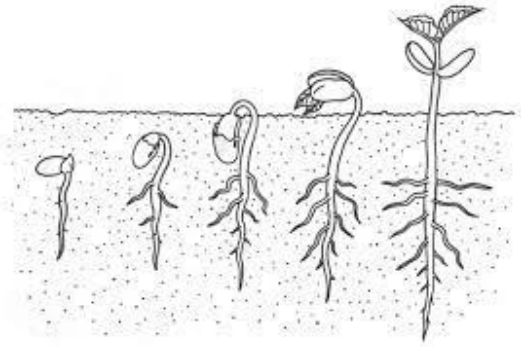
WHERE SEEDS HIDE

Matthew 13: (1-23) 24-35

Rev. Dr. Dawn Jeffers Ramstad

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I enjoy streaming videos over broadcast television because I control what I see and when I watch. I dislike streaming videos over broadcast television because I see highly targeted advertising based on what I watch. Sometimes these choices are laughable; whenever the minimalist channels I follow use the word “decluttering” in a title, the advertisements are often for a national chain craft store’s seasonal home décor. Why should I want to buy more clutter? My educated guess is that based on my viewing, the streaming services think my clutter comes from similar past purchases. The advertising goal is to influence me to keep my poor past habit rather than to strengthen my new habit by repeating how much new “décor” will refresh my home.

Jesus used this same practice of say it once, say it again, and again, until the message sinks in, and frankly he’s very good at it. Jesus preached this way in our scripture for today. His original listeners of these parables knew Jesus expected them were to link the parables with their variations, find the common threads, and apply them in their lives.ⁱ Knowing how Jesus preached is almost as much of a practical blessing as the content of his message. Let me share what I have discovered by keeping all three parables together for a single sermon.

Let’s remember these parables are told at the same time to a large crowd one Sabbath. A large crowd was waiting for him in that fishing village as he left synagogue in a fishing village. Jesus borrowed a boat for a stage used the natural amphitheater of that shoreline so people could hear well. In his first parable, God acted like a farmer, broadcasting seeds everywhere for a new crop. Matthew, a disciple, Matthew was an witness who wrote about that day 40 years later as he neared death. He cared about sharing Jesus’ parables for future generations. Matthew even included Jesus’ explanation for the first parable before going on to the next three, our scripture today.

These three parables are about “the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 13: 24, 31, 33), a Jewish metaphor, another way of saying God is always active in all times and places. Because our 21st century minds may drift into thoughts about life after death when we

hear “heaven,” some of our Bible translators choose to use “God’s reign” to keep our focus on God with us here and now.

“Seeds” are the other metaphor linking these three parables. The first parable is only about the seeds the farmer planted in the field, the seeds that fell on good soil (Matthew 13:8). At night an enemy came and sowed weed seeds in the same field. The middle parable describes God’s reign as a mustard seed the same farmer planted. The last kingdom of God parable, the seed is now a common fungus, yeast, that multiplies when a woman mixes the yeast into flour as she bakes bread.

Jesus taught these parables together, so we know they share a common meaning. Perhaps it will help us our technology-oriented minds to think of these parables as a math equation. All third graders know $1 + 2 + 3 = 6$, but here $1 + 2 + 3 = 1$. The kingdom of God or God’s reign is like a field growing a crop, a mustard seed that becomes a bush, and yeast added to flour to become bread.

Before tractors, farmers planted crops by taking big handfuls of seeds and flinging them in front of themselves as they walked through prepared fields. In this second parable, Jesus is focused on field where the seeds God planted were growing. “At night while no one was watching, an enemy of the farmer came and sowed weed seeds among the wheat. The weeds sprouted with the wheat. The farm hands asked the farmer if they should pull the weeds. The farmer said, ‘Let everything grow. If you pull the weeds now, you will destroy the wheat. When we harvest, we can separate the weeds from the wheat.’” (Mt. 13:25-30, my paraphrase)

A grain of wheat is a good-sized seed, one that is easy to see. But in the next parable, the farmer sowed a small seed, the mustard seed, as a field crop. In my studies this week, I learned some small-scale farmers still believe mustard is a good crop to rotate with wheat because it fixes the nitrogen in the soilⁱⁱ. I imagine Christ knew that. I wonder how many in his live audience knew that wheat and mustard are good plants to rotate. I am sure that as rural people, even if they were not farmers, they knew wheat only grows to be waist high while mustard is a fast-growing bush that can twelve feet high and sturdy enough for birds to build nests in the branches. Birds may build with wheat, but not on wheat.

In the final parable, the harvested wheat was ground into flour, so a woman could mix it with yeast to bake bread. Friends, this parable is many Bible scholars’ favorite because here Jesus reversed everything the priests and priests taught about yeast. Because Passover bread is always made without yeast, they always told parables where yeast equaled sin. For them, yeast in bread dough was like weed seeds in farmer’s

field. But Jesus taught that yeast is just like the farmer's seeds the farmer planted generously by flinging seeds everywhere. Jesus took the Pharisees illustration and stood it on its head! No wonder they wanted to stop him! He took their beloved metaphor and gave it an entirely opposite meaning!

Friends, we are not first century Pharisees. We are 21st century Americans, both Christians and interested seekers alike who have heard—or at least had the opportunity to hear—many sermons about each of these three parables. We know all plants have seeds. We know a weed is a plant growing where it does not belong. We know soil and flour are both growing mediums, rich in nutrients. We know both the farmer and the baker are essential workers who feed the world. But how does what we know help us find new meaning through parables?

In these four parables Jesus preached to a crowd of ordinary people who also knew what we know. In this Christian scripture, the farmer and the baker represent God continually creating and redeeming us.

The seeds, even the yeast, are thoughts planted in our souls. These can be good thoughts, like wheat or mustard. These can be bad thoughts like weeds. Like yeast, these thoughts can even be either good or bad depending on the circumstances. Planted like seeds, those thoughts can grow. The seeds in Jesus' parables represent outside influences that can yield both good and bad results in our lives.

The soil in the field and the flour in the bread bowl represent our lives. Farmers and gardeners are very passionate about soil, and its health. They say soil is not dirt. Dirt will not sustain a crop. Soil is rich in micronutrients. Due to composting and worms, soil is made of past gardens to sustain the current garden. Bakers are equally passionate about flour. The simplest bread recipe is wheat flour, yeast, salt, and water or what the French call a baguette. But bread flour can also be made of corn, rice, and oats. Wheat flour can be whole wheat, bleached all purpose, unbleached all purpose, bread flour with high protein, or cake flour with low protein. Friends, when Jesus told parables about soil and flour, he was talking about us. Our lives are the medium in which the kingdom of God grows.

Often, we want to take God's place and be the ones who plant the seeds in our lives, but that is not what Jesus taught. Jesus taught that God, only God, plants the seeds for the future crop in the fields that are our lives. Only God harvests the yield. Only God mixes in the yeast and bakes the bread. What we need to be about is preparing our souls to receive those seeds. (See Matthew 13:1-23 and the first sermon in this series.)

One way humans imitate God as farmer or baker is through marketing. Like yeast or seeds, advertisements are either good or bad, but it takes wisdom to see the difference. Two weeks ago, I shared how I gave up my Diet Coke habit decades ago because of a Lenten mission challenge. I had fallen into that habit through a particularly catchy advertising jingle, “Just for the taste of it, Diet Coke.” Advertisers had targeted Boomers as young adult consumers in that ad campaign so they could reap on-going profits from our habit/addiction to that product over our lifetimes. By watching local news on Monday, I learned a new energy drink with six times the caffeine of any colaⁱⁱⁱ is now being marketed to those who are now the same age I was then. To we Boomers who still watch broadcast television, advertisers target our fear of dementia with Prevagen ads, but they never say that products is never to be used by those already diagnosed with dementia, information easily found by Googling “Do I need Prevagen?” Several sites of national pharmacies who sell that product pop up with an answer crafted most likely by their legal departments.^{iv} They want to sell us a daily product to profit our fear of dementia. That is just three examples humans sowing seeds of thoughts just as God does, and there are many, many more examples. But all those examples are a sin named greed.

But we who have Christ’s teaching in our lives can make a different choice. We believe that all human life—physical, spiritual, intellectual—is not only shaped in the image of God (Genesis 2:7), but that we come from the very real soil that fosters life here on earth. Our souls are the soil we tend so new life can grow.

One way we do tend is by what you are doing right now, taking time to consider thoughtfully the parables Jesus used to teach us. It is impossible for us to isolate ourselves from all temptation, from the impact of all evil. But it is possible for us to nurture our souls, minds, and bodies but giving time to knowing what Jesus taught, to act on what we learn, to give God’s word enough room to grow in a life our life, to lead us into learning how in our vocations we can be the human that reflects the love and care our Creator gives us all. Amen.

ⁱ This practice is preserved in rabbinical and Christian preaching. I use it often, and many of you thank me for it.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.palmers.co.nz/blogs/gardening-inspiration> Accessed on 7/11/2023. I need to research the nitrogen information more; other articles had other opinions on how poorly mustard fixed nitrogen in the soil and strongly suggested hobby gardeners stick with peas. As a Bible student, I am thinking mustard was the common rotation when and where Jesus preached.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://kstp.com/kstp-news/top-news/some-lawmakers-have-health-concerns-over-popular-energy-drink/>. Published on 07/10/2023, accessed on 07/13/2023.

^{iv} For this sermon illustration, on Tuesday, 11 July, I asked Google “Should I take Prevagen?” and several pharmacy websites, including Good Rx, Walgreens, and CVS all popped up with this same information. I did not take time to research further, but I do wonder if there is news on Instagram about how Prevagen is targeting America’s senior adults.